

No 14

*The Protestant's Birth-Right, or the
Christian's Right of judging for
himself in Matters of Religion.*

A
S E R M O N

Preached at
Worksop in *Nottinghamshire*,
June 1, 1743.

A T T H E
P R I M A R Y V I S I T A T I O N

Of the most Reverend Father in God,

THOMAS, by Divine Providence
Lord Archbishop of *YORK*, &c.

And now published, as a seasonable Antidote against
Papery, *Methodism*, modern *Hobbism*, the Author of
Christianity not founded on Argument, and some other
late Writers.

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Vicar of *Blythe* and *Harworth* in the County of *Not-*
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Earl of *Hyndford*.

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MEMORANDUM

TO THE HONORABLE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR
FROM THE COMMISSIONER OF THE GENERAL LAND OFFICE
SUBJECT: [Illegible]



Reference is made to the report of the [Illegible] dated [Illegible] and to the [Illegible] of the [Illegible] dated [Illegible].

It is recommended that the [Illegible] be [Illegible] and that the [Illegible] be [Illegible].

LUKE XII. 57.

*Yea, and why even of yourselves judge
ye not what is right?*

AS there is nothing which more eminently distinguishes Man from the Brute Creation, than his Intellectual Faculties, and the due Exercise thereof; so we find God, in all his Dealings with Mankind, especially those which concern their spiritual and eternal Happiness, always addressing himself to the Light of their Consciences, and those common Notions of Reason and Understanding, which he has planted in their Souls. And there is no surer Mark of an Imposture, no stronger Proof of any pretended Revelation not being of divine Original, than that the Teachers and Promoters of it, unwilling to be try'd by this Standard, as well knowing that it will not bear the Test of a sober and rational Enquiry, are for excluding Men from the proper Means of Conviction, and arrogantly and irreligiously demand an implicit Assent to whatever Doctrines they advance. Now how widely different such a Procedure is from the Practice of our Blessed Saviour,

will appear from the Words of my Text, as connected with the three preceding Verses ; *And he said also to the People, When ye see a Cloud rise out of the West, straightway ye say there cometh a Shower ; and so it is. And when ye see the South Wind blow, ye say there will be Heat ; and it cometh to pass. Ye Hypocrites, ye can discern the Face of the Sky, and of the Earth, but how is it that ye do not discern this Time ? Yea, and why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right ?*

In these Words our great Lawgiver severely reproaches the *Jews* for not exercising the same Diligence in enquiring into the Time of his coming, and the Marks by which he was to be known, viz. the Prophecies concerning him, the Miracles which he wrought, and the Doctrines he instructed them in, that they did in acquainting themselves with the Signs of the Weather, and the Variableness of the Seasons, tho' the one was of infinitely greater Moment, and did far more nearly concern them than the other, and was full as easy to be understood ; thereby intimating how highly criminal it was not to make Use of their Reason and Understanding, in searching and examining those Scriptures which related to his Divine Mission, and the Deliverance which was to be effected by his Means.

And here it is observable, that our Lord and Master himself, far from requiring an
implicit

implicit Obedience to his Precepts, or to be believed upon his own bare Authority, recommends to them a free and impartial Use of their rational Faculties, and appeals to their own Discernment for the Truth of his Doctrines : *Yea, and why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right ?*

In treating upon which Words, I shall *First* endeavour to prove, that every Man ought to make Use of all proper Means of Instruction, and to judge for himself in Matters of Religion.

Secondly, I shall answer some of the most material Objections that are usually brought against this Doctrine.

And *Thirdly*, I shall draw some useful Inferences, and so conclude.

And *First*, I am to prove, that every Man ought to make Use of all proper Means of Instruction, and to judge for himself in Matters of Religion.—And this I shall do, first from Reason, and an impartial Consideration of the Nature and Essence of Religion.—*Secondly*, from Revelation. And *First*, I am to illustrate this Truth from Reason, and an impartial Survey of the Nature and Essence of Religion.

Religion, in the most proper Sense of the Word, is the Belief of a Deity, who made and governs the World ; and implies all those
Acts

Acts of Adoration and Worship, which result from the Knowledge of his Nature and Essential Attributes, and the Consideration of our own Dependence upon him; and comprehends all those Duties which we owe to him, ourselves, or our Fellow Creatures; in short, whatever we ought to believe or practise, upon the Supposition of our being accountable Agents; and who shall be rewarded or punished by him for all our good or bad Actions.

Now as every Man must either stand or fall, according as he has acted agreeably or disagreeably to those wise Ends and Purposes for which he was created, and for which God sent him into the World; so it concerns him, by all possible Means, to satisfy his own Conscience, and not heedlessly neglect, or impiously despise any Means of Instruction, which fair and impartial Reasoning, or the reveal'd Will of God, shall discover to be such.—But then great Care must be taken, that we do not impose upon our Understandings, nor rashly swallow any Doctrines, however specious they may seem, or whatever Authority they may claim; but strictly, and with an unbiass'd Indifference, survey every Thing, that can with any Shew of Reasoning or Argument be said either for or against them: We must with Meekness and Humility try them by this Rule, whether they are fit for a wise and
good

good God to reveal, or a rational Creature to receive ; and if they either contradict any of the Attributes of God, or interfere with any known moral Duty, we may safely conclude, that they are only the wild Notions of weak fallible Men, the Offspring of a dis-temper'd Head, or the monstrous Productions of a wicked Disposition. Let us employ our Reason and Understanding according to *that glorious Liberty wherewith God has made us free* ; let us take Time often to review our Principles, and consider them well ; and then, tho' we may be mistaken, it will be generally in Things of small or no Importance ; nor will our Errors, after such a sincere Enquiry, expose us to the Anger of a just and good God ; but as they proceed neither from Negligence nor Indolence, neither from Inattention or Contempt, are owing not to a moral Depravity, but a natural Inability, they neither are, nor can possibly be sinful. Whereas to believe any Doctrine only because I received it from my Ancestors, or because it happens to be incorporated into the establish'd Religion of our Country, or perhaps comes recommended by some great or venerable Names, without any other Reason for espousing it, will, even supposing it to be true, be of small or no Esteem in the Sight of God ; but as the Service he requires is a reasonable Service, and the Obedience he expects is a reasonable Obedience,

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such as is agreeable to the Nature of him who gives, and him who receives it, he must needs condemn, and it is highly derogatory to the all-wise Sovereign of the Universe to think otherwise, so lazy and indolent a Resignation, especially in a Matter of so great Importance.

And thus having evinc'd the Truth of my first Proposition from Reason and an impartial Consideration of the Nature and Essence of Religion, I shall proceed to enforce the same from the revealed Will of God, the sacred Scriptures. And, not to insist upon the Text itself as a sufficient Proof of this Truth, we find God, very frequently, both in the Old and New-Testament, appealing to his Creatures for the Equity of his Proceedings, and calling upon them not to extinguish the Light which he has given them, but divesting themselves of all Prejudices and Passions, to weigh and examine the Reasonableness of his Commands, and not neglect any of those Means which he has provided for their Instruction. To instance only in some few of those Places which might be quoted for this Purpose, we find the great *Jewish* Law-giver, in the 6th Chap. of *Deut.* exhorting the whole *Jewish* Nation to a careful Study of the divine Law, and commanding them to *teach it diligently to their Children*, to make it frequently the Subject of their Discourse, and by all possible

ble Means to provide against it's ever slipping out of their Minds : *And these Words, which I command thee this Day, shall be in thine Heart. And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy Children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine House, and when thou walkest by the Way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up ; and thou shalt bind them for a Sign upon thine Head, and they shall be as Frontlets between thine Eyes, and thou shalt write them upon the Door-posts of thy House, and upon thy Gates.* And the *Psalmist's* Character of a Good-Man, is, that *his Delight is in the Law of the Lord*, and in his *Law doth he meditate Day and Night* ; that is, exercise himself in searching into the true Meaning and Intent of it. And in the Prophet *Isaiah*, God calls upon the whole *Jewish* Nation to judge concerning the Equity of his Proceedings ; *judge I pray you betwixt me and my Vineyard.* And certainly if they were capable of judging in an Affair of so nice a Nature, as God's providential Government of the World, they were not unqualified to judge of the Reasonableness of those Laws, which respected their own moral Conduct. *If I speak not the Truth,* says our blessed Saviour, *do not believe me ;* he did not expect to be believed only because he said it, but, contrary to the Practice of his pretended Vicar, has invited Men to examine into the Truth of his Doctrines,

which they are capable of discovering, if they will candidly and honestly set about it. And the Evangelists are very full concerning his inviting Men to search the Scriptures, and his expounding them unto them, which he would never have done, if he had not thought them the proper Subjects of a rational Enquiry. And 'tis a very glorious Character, that is given of the *Beræans* in the *Acts* of the Apostles, that they took Pains to compare what *Paul* said with the Scripture Prophecies, and upon a careful and impartial Examination into the Truth of them, readily embraced his Doctrines. And in the 13th Chap. of the Epistle to the *Corinthians*, the Divine Penman, addressing himself to those factious *Profelytes* who opposed him in the Work of his Ministry, and began to question his apostolical Mission, exhorts them to examine *themselves whether they were in the Faith*, thereby intimating, that if they had from a faithful Search into the Truth of *Christ's* Doctrines, duly informed their Understandings, as they both could and ought to have done, they would not have prov'd so contumacious, nor would ever have questioned his divine Commission. And the same Apostle in his first Epistle to the *Thessalonians*, after having cautioned them not to despise all those who profess'd a divine Illumination, that he might at the same Time guard against too easy a Credulity, advises them,

them, by all proper Means of Conviction, to discriminate betwixt Truth and Falsehood, and adhere to what upon the Issue shall appear to them to be sound and good; *prove all Things, hold fast to that which is good.* And the Apostle St. Peter requires all Christians to be ready always to give an Answer to every one that asketh a Reason of the Hope that is in them, with Meekness and Fear. And St. John, in his 1st Epistle, earnestly desires the Brethren, *not to believe every Spirit, but to try the Spirits whether they are of God, because many false Prophets were gone out into the World.* A great many other Texts might be alledged, but those already quoted are a sufficient Demonstration of what I intended to prove, and may also serve as an Answer to what a late ingenious *Author intimated, that our Lord did not propose his Doctrines as the Subjects of Examination, and that his Apostles neither had Leisure nor Qualifications for the Use of Reasoning in the Propagation of the Gospel.

Secondly, Thus having prov'd both from the Deductions of Reason, and those divine Revelations which are contained in the sacred Writings, that every Man ought to make use of all proper Means of Instruction, and to judge for himself in Matters of Religion; I shall proceed, in the *Second Place*, to answer

* *Christianity not founded on Argument.*

some of the most material Objections, that are usually brought against this Doctrine. And

First, it is objected that if every Man is left to judge for himself in Matters of Religion, it will be productive of numberless Divisions, and be the Cause of many Schisms and Heresies, to the great Disturbance both of Church and State. To which I answer, that the Inconveniences are not perhaps so great as is generally imagined, and that most of those Disorders, which are supposed to have proceeded from thence, have been owing rather to an Anti-christian Usurpation, and an unwarrantable Tyranny over Conscience, than to a Variety of Sentiments, and different Apprehensions. And had the many Sects and Parties into which the Christian Church has been divided, instead of Fines, Tortures, Imprisonments and Death, with all its terrible Appendages, been treated with a Spirit of Meekness and Christian Charity, and had they been attacked with the proper Weapons of our Profession, by Persuasion and Argument, by Preaching and Reasoning, by Prayer and Exhortation, tho' perhaps this would not entirely have healed these unhappy Divisions; yet I am persuaded it would have gone a great Way towards it, or at least, the Leaders and Abettors of them would not have been so furious and turbulent, nor would the Christian World have felt such terrible Convulsions, to the Disgrace of our
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Profession, and to the almost total Extirpation of that *Faith which was once deliver'd to the Saints*. And tho' the Inconveniences were really great, and such as must needs be Matter of Sorrow to every considerate sober Mind, yet may not God have so order'd it, that the Divisions complain'd of should be as Trials of our Charity, and the proper Objects of our Christian Benevolence?—Indeed, when any Doctrines have a plain and manifest Tendency, without any far-fetch'd Consequences, to unhinge the Frame of Society, and strike at the very Foundations of Civil Government, they ought to be restrain'd; but in all other Cases, the Espousers of them must be left to their own Consciences, and to the infallible Decisions of Him who is our common Lord and Master, and into whose Authority all Christians have resolved their Faith and Obedience, and are in Duty bound to submit. As for all other Pretenders to this infallible Guidance, our Blessed Saviour himself has sufficiently arm'd us against their unjust Claims. *Be not ye called Rabbi*, says he, directing his Discourse to his Disciples, *for one is your Master, even Christ, and all ye are Brethren*. And call no Man your Father upon the Earth, for one is your Father which is in Heaven; thereby charging them not to arrogate to themselves that which is God's peculiar Right, or is proper to himself whom God has anointed,

and

and forbids them to erect a Tribunal over Conscience, from which no Appeal was to be made; but rather to behave themselves as Fellow Scholars and Brethren, and to endeavour to exceed one another in nothing but Humility and Love.

A second Objection is, that there are great Numbers, who partly for want of Genius and Natural Abilities, such as Idiots; partly for want of Education and proper Opportunities, such as the Illiterate Multitude, cannot be fit Judges in an Affair of this Nature. As for Idiots, the Answer is obvious, they neither are nor can be reckon'd amongst the Rank of those Beings who are capable of Religion; and what Allowances a good and merciful God will make, and how they will be disposed of in an After-state, is a Question too hard for poor fallible Man to determine; only this we may be fully assured of, that they cannot be miserable; and that the great Judge of the Universe will dispose of them in such a Manner as is agreeable to the most consummate Wisdom and perfect Goodness; for, *shall not the Judge of all the Earth do right?* And as for the Rude and Illiterate, tho' there are a great many Doctrines which they cannot comprehend; yet all the great Lines of our Duty, all the Fundamentals of Christianity, all the Gospel Motives to Virtue and true Piety, are described in so plain and familiar a manner, that the meanest Christian

Christian will readily understand them. And we find our Saviour breaking out in affectionate Expressions of Thanks to God, that he had so order'd the Dispensations of his Mercy, and the Means of attaining eternal Happiness, that they *are not so much understood and embraced by the wise and prudent, as by the modest and humble Enquirer.* I thank thee, says he, O Father, Lord of Heaven and Earth, that thou hast hid these Things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto Babes. And the sacred Writings are very express, that if there are any to whom the glad Tidings of Salvation are not plainly discover'd, it is not owing to any want of Perspicuity in the Divine Oracles, but to their own obstinate Perverseness. Thus St. Paul speaking of himself, and the rest of the inspired Writers, says, *Having renounc'd the hidden Things of Dishonesty, we handle not the Word of God deceitfully, but by Manifestation of the Truth, commending ourselves to every Man's Conscience in the Sight of God.* But if our Gospel is hid, it is hid to them that are lost. Again; it is urged, that there are several Texts of Scripture which condemn the Use of our Reason, and private Examination in Matters of Religion, and remit us to those divine Impressions that are made on Men's Minds concerning it. Nor is this Doctrine only espoused by the Methodical Visionaries, and pretended Spiritualists

ists of all Denominations, but is also patronized by * an Author whom I have already taken Notice of, of a quite different Stamp, who to a fine Genius and lively Imagination, has also added a peculiar Delicacy of Stile. Alas! that such excellent Talents should be so ill employ'd. To enter into a critical Examination of this Work, would exceed the Bounds of a Discourse of this Nature, and therefore I shall only observe, that such a Notion is utterly destructive of all Religion, whether Natural or Reveal'd, and must certainly terminate in downright Enthusiasm. It is true indeed, that great and glorious Things are said concerning these divine Impressions in the sacred Writings, and every good and well-disposed Christian must gratefully acknowledge those promised Assistances; but then the Scripture always supposes them consistent with free Agency, and as concurring with our own honest Endeavours. Thus St. Paul exhorts his *Philippian* Converts, *to work out their Salvation with Fear and Trembling*; and then subjoins, *For it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of his good Pleasure*. And here I heartily wish that the ingenious Author of *Christianity not founded on Argument*, had not given too great Cause to suspect, that his main Intent was to sap the Foundation of all Reli-

* Author of, *Christianity not founded on Argument*.

gion, and by an artful Irony to undermine what he professes to defend. But Thanks be to God, our Faith is too secure to be alarm'd either by the Cunning or Force of its most powerful Adversaries; and whilst Reason and Revelation go Hand in Hand together, and mutually support each other, they cannot fail of being sure of Victory.

The last, and most material Objection, is drawn from the many various Readings, and different Interpretations of several Texts of Scripture, and from the sacred Writings being convey'd in a Language which is but very indifferently understood, even by the Learned themselves; and consequently the Illiterate, who are the Bulk of Mankind, must be forced to commit themselves entirely to the Guidance of others, as not being able to judge which of those different Interpretations is most consonant to Reason, and most expressive of the true Sense of the Writers; nor can they easily be satisfy'd, that the supposed Canon of Scripture is a true one, or that the Books were wrote by those whose Names they bear; or if they were, that the Authors were divinely inspired. To this it may be answer'd, that we ought, by all possible Means of Enquiry, to satisfy ourselves as to the Points objected; and though we are commanded not absolutely to subject our Consciences to any Man's Guidance, yet we not only may, but are in Duty bound,

to apply ourselves to Persons of Learning and Integrity ; Men famous for their Knowledge and Moral Endowments, especially the Ministers of the Gospel, those who have approved themselves deserving of that glorious Character, by an unbiass'd and sincere Discharge of their Function, and by a diligent Search into the Authentickness, Veracity, and Sense of the sacred Writings ; but then we must consider them, not as Governors and Dictators over Conscience, but as Pastors and Teachers, who are only authorized to propound their Opinions, and recommend them by the Gospel Motives of Perswasion and Argument ; and if we add, an Attention free from Prejudice and Passion, and an hearty Desire to inform ourselves aright, we may, by these Advantages, attain to almost as great a Certainty, as if we had been able to read the Scriptures in their original Languages ; and all Doubts concerning the Canon, and Inspiration of them, will be effectually removed, and the various Readings and Interpretations will mutually concur in unfolding to our Understandings those great Truths, upon which our future and eternal Happiness have so immediate and necessary a Dependence.—As these are some of the most material Objections, and as those others which are usually alledged, are either reducible thereto, or have already been taken Notice of in the preceding Discourse : I shall now
 proceed

proceed to draw some useful Inferences, and so conclude.

And *First*, if every Man is required to examine and judge for himself, in all Things that concern his eternal Happiness, *let us stand fast in that Liberty wherewith Christ has made us free*, and carefully guard against any thing that may conduce to rob us of so great a Blessing. Let us, of the Ministry especially, oppose all Encroachments upon our own Consciences, and also avoid all Methods of propagating Christ's Doctrine, which are contrary to that Meekness and Humility which are the great Ornaments of our Profession. Let us confess ourselves fallible in interpreting, and allow to others a Liberty of judging; and above all, let us carefully watch against the wicked Spirit of that Church, who, if she should once re-establish herself in this Nation, would, contrary to the express Words of Scripture, and in open Defiance to the sound Reason of Mankind, erect a Dominion over Conscience, and compel all those who had not Courage enough to support themselves under the sharpest Trials and most barbarous Persecutions, to renounce their Obedience to the one infallible Judge, and to pay that Homage to a mere Mortal, which is only due to God himself.

Secondly, If from what has been said, the pretended Claims of our modern Visionaries,

ries, who are for discarding Reason, and not allowing the intellectual Faculties to be at all concerned in the Interpretation of Scripture, and the Knowledge of our Duty, appear to be what they really are, a ridiculous Medley of Superstition and Enthusiasm, and have already been productive of innumerable ill Consequences, to the great Detriment of Society, and almost Ruin of many unfortunate Families ; let us pity their Errors, pray for their Conversion, and endeavour to reclaim them. Their Principles indeed are so very absurd, so frantick and extravagant, that did not woeful Experience too fatally convince us, one would hardly think they would ever have gained one single Disciple ; and even their boasted Inspirations, and enlightened Expositions of Scripture, are such wild incoherent Stuff, that one might reasonably have expected that their very Founders themselves would long since have demolished their own airy Fabrick, and would have pulled down with one Hand that *Babel*, which they so industriously strove to erect with the other.

Thirdly, If the Doctrine contended for is true, and if we are not to give up our Faith to the absolute Direction of any Man, this not only condemns the making the Decrees of *Popes* and the Determinations of Councils of equal or greater Authority than the Word of God, and requiring such a Sovereignty as admits of no Controul, but also strikes at the Principles

Principles of the *Hobbists*, those late pretenders to Reason and Philosophy, who would have all Religion to depend upon the Laws and Edicts of Princes, and the Will of the Magistrate; nor can any supposed Utility, however speciously pretended, support so groundless and anti-scriptural a Doctrine.

Fourthly and Lastly, If our Religion is so excellent and rational, so becoming a wise and good God to give; if it is so exceedingly well calculated to promote both our present and future Happiness, let us adorn it with a correspondent Holiness and Purity of Life, and demonstrate the Efficacy of it by a prudent and godly Conversation. Let us who are called and set apart to be Teachers of the Gospel, shew that it is such a Gospel as we need not be ashamed of; and as we are bound, in a dutiful Imitation of our great Lord and Master, to exhort others to examine and judge what is right, so let us always be ready to give an Answer to every one that asketh a Reason of the Hope that is in us, with Meekness and Fear. And let all of us, as is most meet, give our hearty Thanks to Almighty God, that we live in a Country, under the Auspices of a Government, and in the Communion of a Church, where the Gospel Freedom of Enquiry and Judging is permitted and profess'd. And let us humbly address ourselves to the Throne of Grace, and to our Prayers add our honest

Endea-

Endeavours, according to our several Stations, that this inestimable Blessing which our Forefathers so dearly purchas'd for us, even at the Expence of their Lives, may be safely transmitted to our latest Posterity. Now unto him that is able to keep us from falling, and to present us faultless before the Presence of his Glory, with exceeding Joy; to the only wise God our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, both now and ever. *Amen.*



F I N I S.

